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ABSTRACT

This four-part report describes a project undertaken by Delta College to implement two required bioethics courses for nursing students: an introductory course in ethical theories and an advanced course in applications of these theories in nursing. After Part I relates how funding for the project was secured and used, Part II delineates the activities that were part of the Nursing Ethics Project, describing staff training efforts, course organization and activities, faculty workshops, and three consultation visits. Part III discusses the impact of the project, revealing that it has resulted in the permanent addition of the two ethics courses to the curriculum. Finally, Part IV presents a narrative self-evaluation, which summarizes the content of both courses and notes the following problems that were encountered: (1) the lack of a bioethics text requiring the development of a workbook; (2) the initial complaints of students who resented a suddenly added curriculum requirement; (3) difficulties experienced in preparing weekly quizzes; (4) the need to avoid specialized, philosophical terminology; (5) the objections of some nursing instructors that the courses lacked clinical relevance; and (6) the lack of discussion of ethical issues in other nursing courses and the danger of creating a separation between the study of ethics and of nursing. (JP)

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FINAL NARRATIVE REPORT

ON

NURSING ETHICS AT DELTA COLLEGE

Funded by Pilot Grant
EP-0111 of The National
Endowment for the Humanities
August 25, 1979 - October 30, 1980

Project Director: Dr. Raymond S. Pfeiffer
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Final Narrative Report on Nursing Ethics at Delta College

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I. Background of Nursing Ethics Project

A consultant grant from NEH brought Professor Norman Bowie to the Delta campus in the Fall of 1977 to facilitate discussions on ways in which the philosophy curriculum could better serve the needs of other disciplines. Discussions with the Nursing Division which began at that time culminated in the writing by Dr. Raymond Pfeiffer of Philosophy and Professor Jessie Dolson of Nursing, of the proposal for a pilot grant of $30,453 to develop and implement a course of study in bioethics to be required of all students in the clinical nursing sequence working toward an Associate Degree in Nursing and R.N. licensure.

The grant was to fund the full-time work of Dr. Pfeiffer on a released time basis for a school year to develop and teach two courses specifically designed for R.N. nursing students. The first course, "Bioethics," would be taken by all students early in their nursing education and would firmly ground them in the fundamental ethical theories, concepts, and reasoning processes essential to ethical decision-making in a nursing context. The second course, "Bioethics: Applications for Nursing," would concentrate on the analysis and evaluation of ethical dilemmas of the nursing profession by drawing on and supplementing the concepts, theories and reasoning processes learned in the first course. The grant funded Dr. Pfeiffer's attendance at conferences in bioethics, the visits of consultants, secretarial help, released time for the assistance of Professor Dolson and five faculty workshops to insure participation of the entire nursing faculty. The grant began on August 25, 1979, and ended on October 30, 1980.

II. Activities of Nursing Ethics Project

Dr. Pfeiffer, the Director of the Nursing Ethics Project, though having studied ethics in graduate school and as an undergraduate, had no prior background in the study of professional ethics or bioethics. He read and researched the subject extensively for four months prior to the beginning of the grant period, and began the school year on August 25, 1979, with a one-day workshop for the nursing faculty. In that workshop, Dr. Pfeiffer reviewed the terms of the grant, defined and discussed the nature of an ethical dilemma, reviewed a procedure for analyzing ethical dilemmas, analyzed with the faculty an ethical dilemma, and asked the faculty to each write out several ethical dilemmas confronted by nurses as resource material for the development of the bioethics classes.

Three weeks later, the first class of the Bioethics course met, and ran for the next ten weeks. Each student met with Dr. Pfeiffer for three hours a week, two of which were devoted to lecture, with about fifty students present, and one of which was a discussion period with a class of half that size. There was a multiple choice quizz of ten to twenty questions each week, a study guide due, and one or two entries in the students' journals due. Readings averaged about three articles per week, half of which were from a textbook, the other half from professional journals. Professor Dolson was present at all class meetings, and regularly critiqued the design of the assignments, quizzes and class meetings.

During the winter semester, the students who had taken the introductory bioethics class in the Fall each met three times with Dr. Pfeiffer in the first three classes of the "Applications" course. They have continued to meet with him once every five weeks, and he will have met with them a total of

nine times beyond the basic class. During the winter, Dr. Pfeiffer also taught the basic bioethics class to the incoming group of clinical nursing students. The pattern has continued into the 1980-1981 academic year, and is projected to continue in the future.

Besides the initial faculty workshop, four additional workshops were held. Dr. Pfeiffer led two of these, and consultants funded by the grant led the other two. The list of the remaining four faculty workshops appears in Appendix A.

Three consultants were brought to the campus during the year. The first was Dr. Terry TenBrink, Professor of Educational Psychology of the University of Missouri at Columbia. On January 4, 1980, Dr. TenBrink spent a half day reviewing and critiquing the multiple choice quizzes given weekly to the students in the basic Bioethics class. Dr. TenBrink's suggestions expanded Dr. Pfeiffer's knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of such quizzes, and resulted in significant improvements in these quizzes.

The second consultant to visit was Dr. Richard Wright, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toledo. The purpose of his visit was to lead a workshop for the nursing faculty on the analysis of ethical dilemmas, on April 21, 1980.

The third consultant to visit was Dr. Mila Aroskar, Associate Professor of Public Health Nursing, University of Minnesota. Professor Aroskar came on May 5, 1980, in order to evaluate the project. Due to the difficulty of getting students to come to campus when the school year was over, she was unable to complete her task of evaluation, but did so on August 28 when she returned to lead a faculty workshop. Her reports comprise Appendix B.

A questionnaire for evaluating the impact of the bioethics courses on the students was developed, and is being used regularly (See Appendix C). Although a great deal of statistical information has been acquired to date, the interpretation of this information is still in the process of development.

During the grant period, Dr. Pfeiffer attended five conferences on the area of medical ethics. These are listed in Appendix D.

Dr. Pfeiffer also attended several one-day, in-service workshops for nurses in local area hospitals. He met on separate occasions with nursing staff from these hospitals, and also met with students after their clinical work in the hospitals.

Dr. Pfeiffer occupied an office adjacent to those of the nursing faculty. He was assigned a "floater" secretary, who was not in his same area, and this at times proved inconvenient. However, other administrative and physical arrangements proved entirely conducive to the success of the project.

The activities of the grant proposal were carried out as they were proposed, and largely within the original time framework. The October 30, 1980, termination date does, however, represent an extension by six months of the original ending date of the grant. This extension was granted by NEH in order that the activities of the grant could be completed less abruptly relative to the academic year's schedule.

III. Impact and Current Status of Project

The RN clinical nursing program at Delta admits about sixty new students each semester. About forty of these students usually complete their work at Delta following a two-semester per year schedule. There are about seventeen

full-time faculty who teach the nursing courses (See Appendix E). The nursing ethics program has had a significant impact on each student and faculty member.

The grant resulted in the addition of the two bioethics courses to the curriculum. These are humanities courses and are now required for graduation from Delta's R.N. program. The first is a two-hour course and the second offers one hour of credit. The course descriptions and outlines are found in Appendix F and actual course materials are in Appendices G and H. In the first course, all sixty students meet together for two hours of lecture each week, and break into two sections for discussions and case analyses for one hour per week. The course spans ten consecutive weeks. The second course spans three semesters, and all meetings take place in sections of thirty or less. Students meet with their philosophy professor for a two-hour class once every five weeks during those three semesters. Full-time teaching load at Delta for humanities faculty is fifteen hours per week of class time, and teaching the bioethics classes takes five hours or one third of a faculty member's duties.

As things now stand, there is every indication that the bioethics courses will continue to be required, offered and taught to Delta's nursing students.

IV. Self-Evaluation

This self-evaluation is provided by the Project Director, Dr. Pfeiffer, as further indication of the strengths and weaknesses of the nursing ethics project.

The curriculum in the first course has been developed to the satisfaction of both the nursing division and the philosophy department. The course is

designed not as a philosophy course intended to acquaint students with philosophical writings on ethics. Its purpose is, rather, to assist students to be able to make rational, informed decisions regarding ethical dilemmas they confront. Making such decisions depends on the ability to analyze dilemmas: that is, the ability to identify the presence of a dilemma, point out the ethical values which are in conflict, and understand the degree of prominence of these values in the particular situation. One must know the reasons why certain values are viewed as important in order to be able to determine when it is appropriate for them to give way to others. To these ends, the first classes are devoted to the study of the principles of confidentiality, truth-telling, paternalism and informal consent. After lectures on the applicability, warrant and controversy surrounding each of these principles, students are provided with case studies involving the principles, and which they must analyze in their journals. The case studies are then discussed in section meetings.

One of the early classes is devoted to the study of basic concepts of logic such as argument, fallacy, normative vs. non-normative. There are also classes focusing on main categories of ethical dilemmas such as those pertaining to experimentation on human subjects, euthanasia and abortion. The latter classes call for more sophisticated use of concepts, principles and patterns of analysis acquired in the first classes. The examples studied in all classes are derived from the experience of the practicing nurse.

The balance of theory and practical application in each class is carefully adjusted to ensure that the classes are neither so theoretical as to be remote nor so concrete and practically oriented as to lack vision or perspective on

the role of principle. Students and faculty alike have responded very positively to all classes and assignments except the one on basics of logic which is currently being revised.

The second bioethics class is designed to cover certain types of issues confronted by the practicing nurse. The two-hour classes have typically included an hour of lecture clarifying the main positions on the issues discussed, and an hour of discussion on the impact these issues make on the work of the practicing nurse. Attention is given to topics surrounding suicide, genetic counseling, professionalism and the ethics of strikes, patients' rights, children's rights and others. The topics roughly correspond with the clinical emphasis of the students' work in their concurrent nursing classes. Thus, when studying pediatric nursing, the student studies children's rights in the bioethics class.

The faculty has been unable to find a bioethics text which provides both a clear, comprehensive and accurate review of the topics covered and at the same time does so with specific reference to the experience of the nurse instead of the physician. Moreover, because high quality writing in the field of bioethics is so recent a phenomenon, many of the most useful writings appear only in journals. As a consequence, many articles have had to be reproduced and handed out to students. A workbook including assignments, some articles, exercises, and other information for the basic bioethics class has been developed (Appendix G). The development of this material was time consuming, but has been effective in streamlining the course. A text is, nonetheless, used for the basic course, though it is of only limited assistance.

One major disappointment has been the program's reception by the students who studied bioethics during its development in 1979-1980. The students who

took it during its first semester were notified of the requirement only after they had arrived on campus to begin their clinical nursing sequence. They were dismayed by the news of an added requirement, and added work load, and have continued to view the bioethics courses as additional to the nursing curriculum, and unnecessary for their nursing education at Delta. This sentiment was intensified by the fact that students who took the courses in 1979-1980 were given no additional credit for their studies in bioethics. Instead, they were told the work they did in the bioethics classes would count as 25% of their nursing grades. Yet, at the same time, the work load in the nursing courses was not reduced to compensate for the added ethics requirement. The students' sense of disappointment at times turned to open dissent and anger.

The sad irony of the students' attitudes is reflected in the recognition by about 90% of them that they have acquired important coping skills, have gained greater understanding of the problems they confront, and are in a better position to be successful decision-makers than they would otherwise have been. Moreover, their complaints about the weaknesses of the bioethics courses have showed little agreement. It is clear that the students' negative attitudes stemmed largely from the way in which the bioethics requirement was initially introduced to the nursing curriculum.

Some negative responses to the bioethics courses result in part from problems with the weekly multiple choice quizzes. Such quizzes were developed to permit weekly testing which would ensure that students did their assignments regularly. This task proved to be far more difficult than had been originally anticipated, and the first quizzes produced were unreasonably wordy, confusing and frustrating to the students. The visit of educational psychologist

Terry TenBrink in January, 1980, was devoted to the critique of the quiz questions, and resulted in significant improvements.

One difficulty has stemmed from the vocabulary appropriate to the study of bioethics. Some of the terms that Dr. Pfeiffer believed to be essential to the study of ethics have been viewed by students as cumbersome, excess baggage, and appear to have intimidated some of the nursing faculty. It has been advantageous to cut back on specialized vocabulary, use ordinary language more frequently, and disregard some of the disadvantages of doing so.

As the requirements are now clearly stated and new groups of students are notified in advance of the bioethics courses and given credit for them, attitudes toward them have improved significantly. Complaints have almost disappeared regarding the first course, and we are now devoting our attention to polishing the second course.

The second course is still very much in the process of development, and some of the topics tried originally have been deemed inappropriate and ineffective. One class on the meaning of life and another on the right to health care seemed most unhelpful to students. Other classes on patients' rights, suicide and the ethics of strikes have proven especially valuable.

Some of the nursing faculty have expressed concern that some of the classes in the second course have been too academic and theoretical, lacking adequate clinical relevance. This suspicion may be due in part to some of the ways in which topics have been discussed in class and in part to some of the ways assignments have been set up. There is a tremendous difference between classes held on the college campus and those held in a hospital where students are

doing their clinical work. Classes on campus are much stiffer, and students show less imagination and less willingness to discuss their clinical experience. Classes held in the hospital literally buzz with excitement, interest and a sense of urgency. Because of Dr. Pfeiffer's schedule, it is impossible for him to meet often in the hospital, and this is a real disadvantage. We are presently considering development of an arrangement that would place a greater responsibility on the nursing faculty for conducting these classes, and would provide Dr. Pfeiffer with more flexibility.

Despite the workshops on bioethics with nursing faculty, there has been less discussion of ethical issues in an analytical fashion between students and faculty than one would wish. Some faculty do try regularly to raise and discuss such issues with their students; but the majority appear reluctant to do so. Short of offering a course in the use of Socratic Method for nursing faculty, there has been some uncertainty as to just how to improve the situation.

One danger which the program was designed to avoid was the separation of the study of ethics from the study of nursing. Although there is considerable integration of the two, it is less than had been hoped. Interest, involvement and commitment of the nursing faculty is the key factor, and work to promote a better integration continues. If nursing faculty could take over some of the classes in the second course, thus freeing Dr. Pfeiffer to visit groups in different hospitals and serve to assist nursing faculty in their roles, there might be some significant strides made in this direction.

The difficulty of the task taken on by Dr. Pfeiffer in the Fall of 1979 is clear in retrospect. The subject of bioethics was at that time quite new to him, and he still needed to read widely in the field. The task of drawing up a

curriculum for beginning students at the same time that he was learning of the subject was at times overwhelming. Moreover, the presence of Professor Dolson in all the bioethics classes from the very beginning was at times experienced by Dr. Pfeiffer as increased pressure. Although the grant appeared to provide ample free time for Dr. Pfeiffer's study of the subject, far more of that time was absorbed by administrative, logistical details than was foreseen. Although the burden was not excessive, it was far heavier than anticipated.

The dynamics of personalities are essential factors in the success of an interdisciplinary project. Professors Pfeiffer and Dolson had no trouble establishing a friendly, constructive, honest, working relationship, and this continues to be a cornerstone of the project. The high esteem in which Professor Dolson is held by her colleagues, and her natural leadership abilities enabled her to exert the kind of influence which motivated the nursing faculty to give the nursing ethics project the benefit of the doubt. The two chairs of the nursing division, Professors Delight McGrandy and Louise McHale, provided significant support and effort in many ways. Professor Dolson's ability to work with them was of major significance. The administrative support of Associate Deans Owen Homeister and Brenda Beckman was crucial to the success of the project.

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge that the NEH project on Nursing Ethics at Delta would have been quite impossible without the harmonious collegial and administrative relationships and internal climate of this college. The strong tradition of self-governance promoting individual initiative and mutual trust and cooperation is an asset which can be seen in cases such as this to bear important educational fruit.